DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 114 399 SP 009 652

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TITLE Ethnicity and Education: Cultural Homogeneity and Ethnic Conflict.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 11p.; Earlier version of this article was given as an address at the National Education Association Conference on Educational Neglect (February 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Biculturalism; Bilingualism; *Cultural Pluralism; *Culture Conflict; Democratic Values; *Educational History; Racial Discrimination; *Socialization

ABSTRACT

Americans have long equated popular education with social cohesion and social mobility. After the American revolution, the school became a focus for patriotism and the institution where individuals learned how to become citizens. The testbooks of the mid-19th and early 20th century emphasized white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant values. While the values of cultural homogeneity have dominated American education since the mid-19th centruy, they have never been implemented without conflict. Four of these conflicts are particularly suggestive of both the extent to which ethnic alternatives were available in education and the limited tolerance for cultural variety in the schools. These are (1) the conflict over foreign customs and foreign languages (biculturalism and bilingualism), (2) the conflicts over parochial education, (3) the conflict between white and black Americans over socialization into a common mold, and (4) the conflict between the cultural values of American ethnic groups and the demands of school achievement. Certain developments in American educational history seem sufficiently clear to allow their use in current debates over ethnicity and the schools. Appeals for ethnic pluralism have a long history in American education and, especially in the 19th century, have sometimes been successful. But the ideological commitment to cultural homogenity in American education has been stronger and has made public education highly resistant to ethnic pluralism. (RC)

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ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION: CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICT*

by

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Introduction

Americans have long equated popular education with social cohesion and social mobility. Since the last decades of the eighteenth century, they have assumed that expanding educational opportunity would strengthen the fiber of democratic life, would teach individuals the essentials of citizenship, and would forge a common value system out of the heterogeneous environment that was America. Instability and change, the seeming failures of traditional institutions like the family and church, and changes in the system of production and distribution of services have been responded to with calls for more schooling, appeals to bring more individuals into the classroom for longer periods of time. Where morality seemed in decline, where class or ethnic conflict was developing, the school was seen as the primary agent for political socialization, the agency most directly involved in instilling commonality and harmony.

American schools have also been viewed as mechanisms of social mobility. Especially after the mid 19th century, expanding educational opportunity and economic advancement were conceived of as synonymous. What was learned in school--behavioral and attitudinal traits, the specific skills of literacy and vocation--would further economic progress for both the individual and society. Upon these assumptions, Americans have pressed for mass public schooling, and indeed, since the early 20th century, have required that all youth spend a substantial part of their time in the classroom. Schools are thus supported because they are believed crucial to political socialization and economic advancement; they preserve the social order by converting questions of social reform and the distribution of economic rewards into educational problems. Reforming the schools and providing greater opportunities to attend school have become the dominant American response to social instability.

While this faith in schooling has been widespread, it occurred only after numerous conflicts. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries there were frequent debates over the best means to achieve a politically homogeneous citizenry. Ethnic groups have been at odds with governmental

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* An earlier version of this article was given as an address at the National Education Association Conference on Educational Neglect, February, 1975.

and educational authorities over the teaching of alternative cultural values. Social classes have divided over the types of education to be offered and over the benefits to be derived from expanding educational opportunity. Questions have been raised over who should control the schools, what curriculum and pedagogy best teaches citizenship and assures economic advancement. And, while the ideology of the melting pot required all children to attend, America's blacks were excluded from the common system. These conflicts touched fundamental assumptions about the United States as a melting pot, about the role of formal education in the assimilation process, and about opportunity in American society.

Schooling and Citizenship

The relationship between schooling and American identity received its most explicit formulation following the American Revolution, when concerns for the uniqueness and tenuousness of the American experiment, fear of Old World corruptions, and the desire to establish a unified nation and a national character fostered numerous proposals for institutions to assure the creation of patriotic citizens. This concern was neither unique to America nor a unique function of schooling. European countries in the process of nationalization showed similar concerns, and calls for a uniquely American literature, art, and architecture were common. But increasingly the school became a focus for patriotism, the institution where individuals learned how to become citizens. Throughout the nineteenth century, the belief that schooling was necessary for political and cultural socialization heightened the pressure to get more children into the classroom.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the definition of citizenship and national identity in America had also become inextricably intertwined with Protestantism. Although Americans had no formal state religion--the heterogeneity and competitiveness of religious denominations had forced them to reject a state supported church--they nonetheless expected their society to be religious. The absence of an established church, however, raised serious problems about how to inculcate religious values. In terms of schooling, the question was simply put: How could religious values be assured in the schools when the state was committed to non-sectarianism? The answer led Americans to distinguish between denominational affiliation and general moral values applicable to society as a whole. This distinction allowed for the adoption of a common denominator Protestantism that stood above doctrinal conflicts. In the process, public education became America's established church. One did not have to be Protestant to be American--although it helped--but one did have to pay psychological deference to Protestantism. Under these conditions, the possibilities of a culturally plural society were severely circumscribed.

These and related assumptions were made explicit in the 19th century classroom through school textbooks. Often the sole curriculum and pedagogical guides available to the inexperienced and transient

individuals who comprised the 19th century teaching force, the textbooks were memorized and recited; they were to be learned, and they revealed the school's expectations about cultural values.

The most constant theme of the text books was national unity. Despite moments of dissent, the United States, students were told, had achieved a consensus on all moral, political, and economic issues. To substantiate this, schoolbooks discussed and indeed, created folk heroes, men who stood above the disputes of their time: The Revolutionary heroes, the self-made Franklin, the tolerant folk hero Lincoln, and above all, Washington--resembling Christ--were the models for America's youth.

The textbooks placed America's national destiny on a divine level. Americans were the chosen people, with God actively at work in forging the nation. As one history of the United States concluded, "We cannot but feel that God has worked in a mysterious way to bring good out of evil. It was He, and not man, who saw and directed the end from the beginning."

The imperatives which a divine national identity placed upon education were apparent in the treatment of racial, religious, and nationality groups. Mankind was divided into separate immutable races with inherent characteristics. In the hierarchy of races, Negroes were the most degraded: gay, thoughtless, untelligent, and subject to violent passions. While slavery was usually regarded as an evil, especially after the Civil War, Negroes continued to be seen as inferior and lacking in those qualities necessary for full citizenship. American Indians were also inferior to whites, though because they were the original inhabitants of America, they were superior to other non-whites. Those First Americans who were peaceful and accepted the white man's march of progress were depicted as "noble savages." Those who tried to prevent the westward movement were simply savages. In either case, the extinction of the Indian was viewed as inevitable, all in the interest of civilization.

In the textbooks, Catholicism was condemned as a false religion. Subversive of the state, inimical to morality, the Church fostered tyranny, superstition and greed. The image of Jews changed during the 19th century from a distinctly religious to a racial group. By the century's end, Jews were seen as incapable of full assimilation into the American melting pot. Their quest for material goods had taken on sinister overtones, identified with urban vices and contrasted to rural morality. The national identity of countries outside the United States was similarly seen as a product of racial characteristics. The Irish were impulsive, quick tempered, violent, fond of drink, and impoverished. The French were more complicated: frivolous and Catholic, they had nonetheless produced Lafayette and Napoleon. Worst of all were the Southern Europeans: racially homogenous, indolent, and Catholic. Italy was a vast ruin ruled by superstition and the papacy; Spain and Portugal bigoted. While other nations, especially England and Germany, received more generous treatment, nineteenth century textbooks taught American children harsh stereotypes of the newcomers populating their land with

increasing frequency. The lesson was clear: while individuals could become Americans by identifying with white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant values, they could only approximate true Americanness. A hierarchy of Americanism had been created.

The best Americans were not simply those who equated Protestant values with patriotism and rejected distinctive nationality and ethnic traits. They were also economically successful. To assure economic success the school was to integrate Protestant morality with secular advancement. In the classroom the Christian religion was converted into a moral code conducive to a burgeoning capitalist economy. Nothing reveals this more effectively than McGuffey's Readers, America's most popular school books. The works of William Holmes McGuffey and his successors sold more than 120 million copies from their first appearance in 1836 to 1920, and most copies received more than one reading.

The Readers were handbooks of good conduct. They encompassed the themes of an emerging middle class morality. Hard work and frugality brought prosperity. Responsibility for success or failure lay with the individual. The affluent should use their wealth in socially responsible ways. A commonality of interests existed among social classes; there was no reason for class conflict. Poverty was cleansing, disobedience unconscionable. Persistence, punctuality, honesty, self-denial, and temperance defined the moral man. But while work was essential to success, individuals should accept the fact that they live in a hierarchical society.

> Work, work, my boy, be not afraid;
> Look labor boldly in the face;
> Take up the hammer or the spade,
> And blush not for your humble place.

Getting ahead, the McGuffey Readers told American youth, involved allegiance to a work ethic in an Anglo-Protestant, white society.

American Education and Ethnic Conflict

While the values of cultural homogeneity have dominated American education since the mid-19th century, they have never been implemented without conflict. Four of these conflicts are particularly suggestive of both the extent to which ethnic alternatives were available in education and of the limited tolerance for cultural variety in the schools.

Biculturalism and Bilingualism

There is no doubt that most immigrants to America wanted to become Americans. But it is also clear that many wanted some continuity between their ethnic cultures and the dominant culture of their new environment. They did not wish to see their children's American citizenship gained at the expense of deep and open hostility toward the culture and language of their former homeland.

For much of the nineteenth century, certainly before the 1880's, the structure of American public education allowed immigrant groups to incorporate linguistic and cultural traditions into the schools. In urban, as well as rural areas, schools were decentralized and locally controlled. As such, they were responsive to ethnic and political pressures, and immigrant groups could successfully assert that the preservation of their cultural identity was a legitimate responsibility of public education.

Usually, this preservation took the form of instruction in a language other than or in addition to English. Indeed, wherever immigrant groups possessed sufficient political power--be they Italian, Polish, Czech, French, Dutch, German--foreign languages were introduced into elementary and secondary schools, either as separate or as languages of instruction.

The most successful group in the nineteenth century were the Germans. In numerous cities, German became a regular part of the elementary school curriculum. In Cincinnati, for example, children in the first four grades wishing to do so (about 14,000 in 1899) could split their school week between an English teacher and a German teacher. During the mid 1870's, St. Louis's Superintendent of Schools, William T. Harris, soon to become United States Commissioner of Education, defended his city's bilingual program by claiming that "national memories and aspirations, family traditions, customs, and habits, moral and religious observances--cannot be suddenly removed or changed without disastrously weakening the personality."

Yet despite these successes in ethnic pluralism, pressure to convert to a culturally homogenous value system proved too great. At the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century, bilingualism and biculturalism in the public schools were rapidly disappearing. The conflict over foreign languages and foreign customs, what one historian has called, "a symbolic battle between those who wanted to impose one standard of belief and those who welcomed pluralistic forms of education" was being resolved, and pluralism was in full retreat.

The Catholic Alternative

When one turns to the Catholic response to the cultural homogenization of the public schools, one finds a more complicated story.

Before 1870, there was no mass movement toward Catholic parochial schools. This does not mean that there were no parochial schools or no conflict between Catholics and non-Catholics before 1870. There were. In New York City during the 1850's Bishop John Hughes inveighed against the "Socialism, Red Republicanism, Universalism, Deism, Atheism [and] Pantheism" of the public schools. Church councils called for schools to provide Catholic children with a Catholic education. And, religious orders brought with them from Europe commitments to traditional values that appealed to Catholic immigrants and a willingness to maintain schools at subsistence wages. But while important as a basis for future growth, these efforts were never part of a consolidated drive toward parochial schooling, and most Catholics found the informal options of a decentralized

public system open to group pressures sufficient to their needs.

In the four decades after 1870, however, that situation dramatically altered. As the informal, decentralized public schools changed to a centralized bureaucratic system, the influence of local interest groups waned. Simultaneously, schooling itself took on new importance; high rates of voluntary attendance were reinforced by the passage of compulsory attendance legislation. Going to school had become important. By the 1890's three out of five parishes had established parochial schools as alternatives to the public system, many of the schools maintained only with great economic difficulty. More important, an increasing number of Catholics had concluded that support for the local parochial school was an excellent, perhaps the best way of expressing their religious convictions.

From the perspective of ethnic pluralism, two aspects of the origins and subsequent development of parochial schooling are particularly relevant. First, the system was born of conflicts. Second, once the commitment to an alternative system was made, certainly by 1920, Catholics tended to minimize differences between parochial and public schooling.

The conflicts over parochial education can be broadly categorized as conflict between Protestants and Catholics and conflict within the church among nationality groups. Anti-Catholicism was frequently tied to anti-foreignism in the nineteenth century, and the public schoolmen often assumed that one could not be a good American and a good Catholic. Of special importance at the end of the nineteenth century was the collapse of a number of attempted detentes between Catholic authorities and public school officials; plans to allow nuns and priests to teach in public schools, transfers of property that would give public school authorities use of the parochial school buildings in return for a continued Catholic atmosphere, and released time experiments were the most common proposals. While such compromises were opposed by Catholics distrustful of public institutions, the more extreme objections came from non-Catholics and public school educators unwilling to accommodate to minority group sentiments.

Conflict within the church among different nationality groups was also of major importance in the proliferation of parochial schools. The arrival of large numbers of Polish, Southern Slav and Italian Catholics after 1880, when added to the nationalist oriented German Catholic population, forced the largely Irish church hierarchy into a de facto acceptance of parishes along national lines. While the situation varied throughout the country, these groups were often unwilling to attend either the public schools or the parochial schools of another Catholic nationality and proceeded to set up their own alternative to both.

Conflict was not the only reason for the establishment of parochial schools. Many Catholics arrived in America with the belief that education should be an extension of family life, and Catholics thus supported the idea that the school should be under church auspices. Yet, in historical retrospect, conflict--between Catholics and Protestants and among nationalities within Catholicism--appears as the crucial determinant in the origins of the parochial school system in America.

While the parochial system thus originated as a religious and ethnic alternative to public education, equally striking has been the pressure on that system to conform as closely as possible to the public schools. From World War I on, Catholic educators have emphasized the Americanness of their parochial schools, and that the values taught there are ones held in common by most Americans, save for distinctions of religious preference. This is not to suggest that parochial schools and public schools have been and are exactly the same. But while there are differences, parochial schools and public schools in the same localities do share striking resemblances to one another. What began as an explicitly different system has wound up considerably less different than Catholics and non-Catholics would have predicted 75 years ago.

Blacks and the Melting Pot

In the conflict between white and black Americans over socialization into a common mold, one finds the supreme irony. The ideology of conformity required that as many as possible be brought into the public schools as the only sure way to achieve a common socialization process. But from the beginning black Americans were told they could not get in. Race was the line that could not be crossed in the melting pot of the common school.

Through most of the 19th century, white techniques of exclusion were blatant--even where free, blacks were considered inferior, and their inferiority was assumed to be contagious. They thus had no place in white classrooms. After 1890, however, northern educators were less direct in their exclusion of blacks. Their rhetoric centered less on distinctions of race than upon the need for schools to be realistic and relevant, to concentrate, in short, upon fitting the student to the realities of the economic and social marketplace and to the realities of scientific measures of intelligence.

This took a variety of forms:

> Educational tests showed that black children had low mental levels and therefore black children were unfit for rigorous academic learning.
>
> Since discrimination in the economy was such that blacks could not get good jobs, schools should, therefore, train black children for the jobs they could get: girls would receive training for domestic service; boys for unskilled menial labor.
>
> Blacks, it was argued, grew up in immoral atmospheres. The schooling of black children, therefore, should emphasize basic moral values absent from their home life and neighborhoods.

None of this was exclusively limited to America's blacks. Similar comments and expectations were made about other ethnic groups and the poor

generally. But for blacks, exclusion from the expectations of the melting pot was more total, more systematic, more discriminatory. If the goal of American educators was to adjust the individual to the realities of the society, it was America's blacks for whom the realities were most oppressive.

The black response to the processes of exclusion varied by community and by the exigencies of the political moment. Before the advent of mass public education, blacks who received schooling did so through voluntary associations and through philanthropic and religious agencies. As public schooling came increasingly to dominate the formal agencies of education in the latter half of the 19th century, black communities often split over the goals of integration versus segregation. Sometimes the goal was for entry into white schools, the participation of black children on an equal basis with whites. In some cases, the demand was for separate but equal schools, places where black children could be taught by blacks and where they would be free from the hostility and prejudices of white children and white teachers.

Whatever the politics of any particular situation, blacks showed a willingness to use a multiplicity of techniques to win their case: court action against school boards, public pleas and lobbying, school boycotts, all attempts to force the white power structure to respond.

Through it all, one theme had become clear: for blacks, the burden of educational justice lay upon themselves. It was the black community that had to justify, seek, and indeed seize quality schooling for its children. The goals of cultural uniformity did not include America's blacks.

Ethnic Culture and School Achievement

The cultural values of American ethnic groups and the demands of school achievement have frequently been in conflict. While there are many reasons why some groups achieved more highly in the public schools than others--economic status, previous cultural background, the availability of rewards through schooling, levels of discrimination, and the attitudes and climates of individual schools and teachers--at least part of the difference should be attributed to the discrepancies between what was expected and rewarded by ethnic and family cultures and what was demanded by school authorities. A striking example of this is the case of the children of Southern Italian immigrants.

Most of the available evidence suggests that Southern Italian children did not do well in school. School authorities complained of their unruliness and truancy, dropout levels were high, and there seemed to be little enthusiasm among Southern Italian parents for advancing their children's academic careers. There were undoubtedly many reasons for this, ranging from hostility to Southern Italians by school people to the economic pressures that required early school leaving. But it is also clear that Southern Italian cultural values conflicted with the demands of formal schooling in America, and in that conflict, the Italian child either had to change or was dropped by the wayside.

Italians of the contadino or the peasant class of Southern Italy

arrived in America with cultural patterns conditioned by chronic poverty, a rigid social structure, and by exploitation of frequently absent landlords. In a world heavily stacked against them, the contadini found in their families the sole refuge within which trust and loyalty could be cultivated. The world was "us," the family versus "them," the official institutions, the state, the outsiders. To survive required complete loyalty to "us" with as little contact as possible with "them."

Schools, in this context, were alien institutions maintained by the upper classes at the contadini's expense. Few peasant children went beyond the third grade, and they received little incentive from their teachers to achieve further. Nor was formal education supported by the Church. Catholicism in Southern Italy was marked by mysticism, the supernatural, and emotional identification with the patron saints. Rarely was the Italian peasant expected to be able to read the prayer book. Knowledge--religious and secular--was based on community folklore, not on written texts, to be learned,not debated or analyzed.

This background ill-disposed Southern Italian immigrants to respond favorably to American schools. Schooling was seen as a direct challenge to family values and parental control. The dominant concern of many Southern Italian parents seems to have been that the school would indoctrinate their children with ideas antagonistic to the traditional codes of family life. Reporting on the dilemma of being Italian in New York's public schools, a sociologist wrote that "it is in the school that the one institution which is an integral part of his nature and devotion--his home--is constantly subjected to objections." In addition, schooling, especially for adolescents, conflicted with the economic needs and expectations of Southern Italian families. Once old enough to contribute, Italian youth were expected to work.

Southern Italians did change in America as they grasped the opportunities to become middle class. But for at least a generation, the strong familial culture of Southern Italian children, in conflict with the values of public schooling, was met by disinterest or hostility on the part of American educators. The conflict was not unique to Italians; variations on the theme affected most ethnic groups. But Southern Italians clearly suffered from American education's inability to respond sensitively to familial and communal values or to provide secure learning environments for children caught in the conflict of cultures.

Lessons of the Past

Extrapolating themes from the past and offering them as lessons for the present is always a tricky business. Certain developments in American educational history, however, seem sufficiently clear to allow their use in current debates over ethnicity and the schools. Appeals for ethnic pluralism have a long history in American education and, especially before the late nineteenth century, have sometimes been successful. But more striking has been the ideological commitment to cultural homogeneity. Partially out of this commitment, a bureaucratic administrative structure was established that has made public education highly resistant to ethnic

pluralism. Most ethnic groups were thus forced to choose their cultural identities from a narrow spectrum of acceptable responses, or were forced to become "less American." The school viewed strong identification with one's ethnic heritage as a drawback to success in America. For some groups, there were no choices. At best, blacks, Indians, and other non-whites were defined as second class citizens, at worst as non-citizens. The historical evidence also suggests that without explicit commitments to multi-culturalism as essential to American life and without a bureaucratic reorganization that allows for considerably more decentralized decision making, it is very unlikely that varied cultural values and styles will be acceptable in the public schools.

If this seems clear, it is also important to be wary about what remains unsaid. Ethnicity is a more legitimate form of self-identification in America than social class, and what is labeled ethnic conflict is as often conflict between social classes. We should thus recognize that some of the current furor over ethnicity may separate and divide groups who should be tied together by class allegiances. If all that ethnicity today turns out to be is a grab for larger hunk of a pie that is already too small for the working class and the poor, then the hopes for a more ethnically plural society will be sorely disappointed.

We should also recognize that calls for ethnic pluralism may be symbolic, demands not so much for the acceptance of substantially different values in the schools, but pleas for recognition: "show us you are not against us, for we want to be good citizens." Such pleas are real, in the sense that they may be necessary for every group that feels itself outside the mainstream or neglected by those in power. But pleas to be recognized are not the same as a movement toward an acceptance of and support for multi-cultural behavior.

Finally, in the quest for a more pluralist society, it is important to ask the question of how much cultural pluralism can be tolerated if Americans are to retain political unity. For the time being, that question may well be a red herring. The kind of political unity obtained by ignoring cultural differences has not been the kind of politics any American can be proud of. It is probably wiser to assume that the issue of political unity should await a fuller acceptance of multi-culturalism. But ultimately the relationship between cultural pluralism and political unity will have to be faced.